

An Argument for Dialogue in Definition of National Policies for Education

Noel F. McGinn

formerly Harvard University

Abstract

Poor and especially small countries cannot become self-reliant in the full sense of the word. Instead they must form alliances that foster collaboration in the pursuit of mutual objectives. This will be easier to accomplish if donor nations and assistance agencies avoid dictating solutions and if technical assistance shifts away from teaching “best practices.” A third requirement is a shift from assistance to individual countries to assistance to sets of countries collaborating on mutual development projects.

Introduction

There is a certain appeal in the concept of “self-reliant definition of national policies,” especially in education. Education systems everywhere are designed to contribute to national identity and love of country. It is reasonable to insist that decisions about the content and process of education should be left to the country receiving assistance.

On the other hand, in this era of globalization, is it possible for any country to be “self-reliant”? Given the increasing number and complexity of linkages and dependencies between countries, can any one country, especially a small and poor country, “go it alone”? Can any country be “autonomous” and still develop at the same pace as other nations that benefit by sharing each other’s knowledge and skills? Or do the poor countries of the world face a Cruel Choice (Goulet 1985), to either submit to the control of a world economy dominated by their former imperial masters, or to isolate themselves from the forces of development, and live forever in poverty?

To avoid the necessity of the Cruel Choice, poor countries have to increase their capacity to develop. This capacity depends not so much on isolation from others who have disposable information and resources, but on collaboration with them in the pursuit of shared development. More is required than merely extending “ownership” of assistance projects to individual recipient countries. Those who would help others must do more than wait to be asked for assistance (Boeren 1999). Instead, they must be active in pursuing objectives that matter to all participants. Only if the success, or failure, of development projects affects all participants will relationships achieve the full meaning of partnership and collaboration.

For this to happen, the richer nations and international assistance agencies must change how they offer technical assistance, and separate their material assistance from information about policy alternatives. The poorer nations, for their part, must expand their ability to

collaborate with each other in a form of “mutual reliance.” All parties have to engage in an informed dialogue about their goals for the development of education.¹

I begin with a discussion of the meaning, and demands, of collaboration as the basis for achieving the objectives of “self-reliant definition of national policies in education.”

Distinguishing Cooperation from Collaboration

Cooperation

The term “assistance” or “aid” generally refers to a one-directional transfer of knowledge, skills or resources, from one country to another. This kind of relationship is called cooperation: the country or agency providing the assistance “cooperates” with the country seeking to improve itself.

The “aid” and technical assistance provided by these organizations is loaned, rather than given, and with the intention of changing the recipient, with no change to the giver. This one-way relationship of assistance is justified by reference to the superior knowledge of the lending agency. The political and economic power of the agency is used to impose their knowledge.

As we know, foreign aid has proven to be a slow and ineffective way to bring about positive change, by any measure, in poor countries. The frequent failure of aid to realize its stated objectives (Banerjee & Rondinelli 2003; Godfrey et al. 2002; Habte 1999; Kosack 2003; Novartis Foundation for Sustainable Development 2004) is explained in at least three ways.

- 1) Recipient governments use aid to replace their own funds, rather than to increase total spending on education.
- 2) Projects financed by loans often have failed to yield good results and the loan’s high direct costs have limited the ability of countries to pursue other, more important activities.
- 3) Both loans and assistance often have high opportunity costs. Reliance on external assistance has contributed to failure to develop endogenous capacity for the improvement of education. This seems like an argument for self-reliance; we will return to this point.

Most important, the long-term effect of aid has been a reduction of differences, in structures and policies, beliefs and customs, between participating countries. Over time, all the education systems of the world have come to look much like one another, in terms of curriculum content, pedagogical process, and management and governance.² This

¹ A similar argument is put forward by Boeren (1999) in a more general discussion of development assistance.

² At least one study argues that bilateral and multilateral assistance agencies share and act to institutionalize “a uniform ideology, structure, and practice by nation-states” in the provision of education (McNeely 1995). Those who make this assertion point to the remarkable similarities in structure, content, and practice of education systems around the world as well as in the Americas (Benavot & Kamens 1989; Puiggrós 1996; Ramirez 1997; Ramirez & Boli 1987).

standardization threatens a loss of cultural diversity, not only of great present value but also as a source of solutions for what an uncertain future will clearly bring.

The critical factor here is not the transfer of money, not the loan itself. Most new successful businesses borrowed money to begin operations. It is also not the transfer of information from the outside, as successful organizations constantly monitor what their competitors are doing and review latest developments in public science and technology. What is at fault is the form of the relationship between lender and recipient, the way in which technical assistance is provided.

Collaboration

The alternative is collaboration. Distinct from cooperation as assistance, collaboration requires a two-directional relationship. Both participants expect to benefit from the relationship; each gives freely but each receives. What is received by each may be different but should be equal in importance to the recipient, or else the relationship is exploitative. In a collaborative relationship, participants hold mutual goals and share responsibilities, accountability for success, and rewards.

Significantly, the benefit from collaboration increases as participants differ from each other, as they have something to exchange that the other participant does not have. Collaboration enriches participants by complementarity, by providing greater diversity and complexity in their material goods, knowledge and culture.

Collaborative relationships necessarily involve more interactions than does mere transfer of resources. In order for the participants to help each other they must understand each other's objectives and constraints, which requires some amount of intrusion into each other's affairs. Collaborative relationships are therefore more difficult to sustain in the beginning (Eversole 2003), but the synergy they develop overwhelms misgivings about the costs of continuing (Brinkerhoff & Goldsmith 2003).

In order to develop and sustain collaborative relationships three kinds of changes must be made in the development assistance process. First, richer nations and international assistance agencies must change their relationship with recipient countries. Instead of dictating policies and terms they must become partners in development. Second, the objective of technical assistance must shift from providing international "best practices" to enabling local researchers and policy makers to generate more relevant information and policy alternatives. Third, development should increasingly be seen as a function of relationships among countries, rather than dependent primarily on conditions within individual nations. This requires a shift from assistance to individual countries to assistance to sets of countries collaborating on mutual development projects.

Structural Changes in Donor Agencies

The shift from "aid" as cooperation to genuine collaboration requires a change in the structure of lending and donor agencies. The most important change is to de-link material

assistance from technical assistance. This is accomplished in several ways:

- a. Build a barrier or “fire wall” within the agency between the grant or loan process, and the technical assistance process. It is easier to refuse advice about what to do when grants or loans are not conditional on carrying out the donor’s proposal. This approach is most effective when research focuses on alternative approaches rather than best practices.
- b. Contract out technical assistance, and make efforts to protect the independence of contractors. This approach works best when agencies fund external research to develop alternative solutions for development problems. It may require agency efforts to expand the number and diversity of point of view of contractors who do development research, both in recipient countries as well as in the richer nations.
- c. Third, make development of national capacity for decision-making a primary objective of all education projects.³ This may require delaying project initiation until the recipient government can take control. This capacity includes capacity to generate and analyze requisite information, as well as to design solution and implement decisions. Locally produced information should be cheaper than that produced by expatriate researchers. It can be of much greater relevance given national values and political realities. Almost all countries now have some capacity for education research, although in many countries it is limited in volume and quality. A shift in funding from agency-generated research and reliance on expatriate researchers, to nationally generated research, would over time rectify this problem.⁴

The Role for Technical Assistance

Paradoxically, technical assistance is even more important in collaborative relationships than in conventional aid. This is best illustrated by reference to education and learning. Development is the result of learning, of changing old objectives and old methods for new ones that are more effective. There are two broad sources of learning: through imitation of the knowledge of others, either through direct transfer or observation; and experience. In imitative learning the learner attempts to model or copy the symbols and behaviors associated with someone else’s knowledge: “best practices” discovered elsewhere are used as an instruction book, ignoring the importance of context.

Experiential learning, on the other hand, generates knowledge within the context in which the individual or organization operates. In acquisitive learning knowledge is transferred using the context of the lender; in experiential learning it is produced using the context of

³ Chung (1999) argues that assistance should focus on development of national institutions, such as ministries of education. She cites African examples of the importance of strong national institutions in development of education.

⁴ Although assistance agencies express capacity building for policy analysis as a primary objective, a large fraction of their budget has been spent on their own staff and expatriate advisors who invade national policies and politics (King 1992).

the learner. Knowledge gained through experience is therefore superior, not only for its fit to context, but also because it facilitates further innovation (March 1999).

The situation of the technical advisor today is similar to that of the classroom teacher. Perhaps at one time the information held by teachers and transmitted in schools was held uniquely by them. Schools at one time did have a monopoly on the information considered important to learn (in part because they fostered the myth that their information was the only one that mattered). Today that situation holds only in the exceptional case. Not only is the information in which schools deal widely available through other sources (some more entertaining), but many people now believe that other kinds of information are of equal or higher value than that of schools.

Similarly, the technical advisor from an assistance agency today is less often the sole source of information available to developing nations. There are increasing numbers of citizens educated abroad. Mass media from other countries reach the farthest corner of the country. Multinational corporations import information as well as production technologies. The gap in information supply and access between poor and rich nations may have grown larger, but many countries now have alternative information sources.

How then could it be possible for technical assistance to contribute to endogenous development? How could advice be given without imposing “expert” solutions from outside? There are various ways to reduce the risk of transmitting so-called universal solutions. The first is through an approach like that of “teaching for understanding.” Similar to active or discovery learning or the project method, this approach de-emphasizes the technical advisor as sole information source or knowledge expert. Knowledge, or understanding of the information we have, is always personal. Others can facilitate our learning, but can not transfer knowledge in the same way we transfer funds from one bank account to another. It may be possible to transfer information that the learner converts to understanding; even better is for learners to generate contextually relevant information. In comparative terms, expatriate advisors are most likely to excel in terms of methods of information generation, and information about experiences in other settings. As interlocutors, they may also contribute to analysis of past errors. Local advisors should have more information about local conditions and are better able to construct the appropriate knowledge.

Strategies for Technical Assistance

The value of technical advisors is not just or even principally the volume of knowledge they may carry about. Rather, it is that the interaction of their knowledge with that of the recipient country can generate opportunities for new insights and learning. Precisely because those from outside are different from us, know different things, think in different ways, use language differently, they can enable us to see our problems, and our knowledge, in new ways, and therefore learn. Their interaction with us, even though it often is frustrating, can enable us to advance in our own, unique understanding.

Here are seven ways in which technical advisors can contribute to increasing the control by recipient countries over their own education (Godfrey et al. 2002; Reimers & McGinn 1997).

1. Encourage organizational learning in the recipient country by promoting structured debate on critical issues. External agencies, better than national organizations, are seen as trustworthy sponsors of discussions of critical issues. These discussions bring together groups that otherwise never exchange views, providing an opportunity to recognize points of agreement, and to invent effective compromise solutions. In many developing countries ministries of education have little or no contact with universities, labor unions, religious organizations, or the business community, all of who can provide resources to facilitate the development process. Begin with a technical analysis of data, then proceed to policy implications.
2. Mobilize public support for improvement of education that transcends the term of a government in office. External agencies can support national groups that bring together all sectors of society, and continually focus and re-focus attention on improvement of education. Indicators of success would include:
 - A minister of education being asked to stay on the job by the next government;
 - A minister of education subscribing to the directions for reform set by the prior government;
 - A minister of education asking an advisory committee, representing different members of the civil society, to become a regular partner in discussing policy;
 - A ministry of education and the national university community learning to cooperate with each other.
3. Provide training to all participants in systematic use of analytic techniques for the identification of problems, exploration of alternatives, design of implementation and financial control and evaluation of outcomes. Include qualitative as well as quantitative techniques and insist on the value of each.
4. Allow sufficient time. Learning often is slow and seldom pursues a straight path. Expect that the role of the external advisor will continue after training, but will switch from externally initiated action to waiting for national requests. In El Salvador, external advisors invited parties in the former civil war to supervise their collection of data about the education system. More than a year after the assessment was completed the advisory committee continued meeting. A number of public meetings were organized to discuss findings and implications. Eventually the Ministry of Education recognized this group as a partner for discussion of issues of education reform.
5. Evaluate the success of the external intervention not in terms of the studies and reports produced, but instead in terms of capacities developed within public and private institutions. The most important measure is that recipients begin doing things differently and assessing the consequences of their action. Especially encouraging is when the new activities of the learners are not those expected by their external advisors.
6. Emphasize the contribution of the external advisor to improving communication between recipients. Communication requires learning to listen: external advisors

often have sufficient legitimacy to act as trustworthy moderators of discussions that otherwise end in each party rejecting the other's legitimacy. If we have anything to offer in terms of problem identification it is in our abilities to reconcile or identify conflict among multiple perspectives of stakeholders about problems and to provide a framework to organize the identification of problems and to assist in the identification of options.

7. Advisors must be learners also, and therefore deliberately try out approaches and strategies new to them. Finding a space for innovations requires negotiation of risk taking with the lending agency and with the client. Some of the innovations to be negotiated with the lending agency include:
 - a. writing final reports in the local language,
 - b. working with organizations which are in the political opposition,
 - c. relying extensively on local consultants,
 - d. investing extensively in dialogue with key stakeholders to conceptualize the problem from multiple perspectives.

Even more risky but often highly effective, is for the advisor to make himself or herself vulnerable to the clients and stakeholders. This is done by announcing, when trying out new approaches, that we are not sure what will happen, that is, that we are not "expert". This equalizes the relationship between advisor and client, and enhances learning.

Changes in Recipient Countries

One further set of changes is required to insure that developing nations develop in authentic diversity. In addition to structural changes in lending and donor agencies, and changes in technical assistance, give the recipient countries themselves control over the assistance process (Boeren 1999). Given today's highly inter-dependent world, development no longer is accomplished without collaborative exchange relationships. Unfortunately, the gap between rich and poor nations is now so large that many conversations can become one-sided. The solution is to enable poor nations to supply each other with the vital resources, human and physical, required for development. Those needs can be met by pooling in common the resources they hold individually, taking advantage of their diversity. External assistance can increase their capacity for collaboration with each other.

The following two suggestions are intended to promote the capacity of developing countries, acting together, to provide assistance to each other.

1. Regionalization of Aid⁵

The first proposal is that agencies give priority to funding of projects that involve collaboration between recipient countries. Experiences across countries can yield a fuller range of successful and unsuccessful strategies than are visible in any given country. Regional

⁵ Hirosato (2001) offers a detailed plan for development of regional assistance to education for Asia.

collaboration permits economies of scale not achieved when countries undertake their own projects. Globalization is both a cause and a source of solution for some of the problems poor countries face. Collaborative action at the regional level can contribute both to solving these problems and to enhancing national idiosyncrasies. There is now considerable experience in coordination among recipient countries with respect to higher education (Van Audenhove 1999).

This is a Collaboration Model. The objective is to encourage countries to assume responsibility for monitoring of each other.

2. Regional Organizations to Mediate Aid

The second proposal carries further the concept of coordination. It calls for the creation of a funding organization representing several or more countries in a region. This organization may be created for the sole purpose of ministering and allocating development funds provided by the donor agencies or countries. Countries apply to the regional fund, rather than to the agencies. The regional fund organization has the authority, and the staff, to evaluate the contribution of the requested assistance to development in the region. Special attention might be given to projects that involve two or more countries, such as development of textbooks, assessment or even curriculum.⁶

This might be called the Peer Review Model. The regional organization could be staffed with citizens of the aid-receiving countries now working in the various international assistance agencies. The organization should be given high visibility. It would of course be accountable to countries contributing to the regional development fund. The first project might be the establishment of a regional organization for training in development management.

The Association for the Development of Education in Africa is the donors' equivalent of such an organization. The ADEA is a significant improvement in terms of donor coordination, transparency, and dissemination of information. In addition ADEA makes important contributions to recipient participation in policy decisions, principally by providing a forum in which recipients can make their views known. It is not yet, however, their organization. Recipient countries are invited guests. It does not, then, satisfy all the principles of partnership and ownership.

The new organization could be based on the same concept of ADEA, but switch roles. Now representatives of participating developing countries would constitute the organization, and donor and lending agencies would be the guests. This organization would require autonomy from both agencies and recipient countries. Its authority, granted by participating recipients, would include:

- a. approval, or denial, of all requests for assistance
- b. monitoring of fund use in recipient countries, and of project implementation
- c. evaluation of consequences of completed projects, and

⁶ This proposal is based on the notion of "autonomous development funds" developed by Hyden (Hyden 1995; Hyden 1996; Hyden 1997).

d. cessation of funding and future grants in case of malfeasance.

Obviously such an organization could only survive if it were backed with legitimacy and funds by the current donors and lenders and staffed with reputable people. Both conditions can be met at this time.

From Self-Reliance to Mutual Reliance

Rather than disconnected, isolated nations, we should promote nations actively engaged with each other. Rather than self-reliance, cooperation and collaboration should characterize the dominant activity of the developing world. We should promote mutual reliance.

Unfortunately, some of the current policies of developed nations and assistance agencies act to inhibit and actively block collaboration among the poor nations. Rather than talking with the neighbors, poor countries spend their time hosting delegations from international and bilateral agencies and attending conferences in luxurious world capitals. The few educated and talented persons they manage to educate are hired away from their home country by the international agencies, and put to work in other regions. Assistance is given to one country at a time, with little or no opportunity to match efforts in one country with experiences in another. The agencies are driven to seek rapid results, impeding the opportunity to force relationships that will sustain reforms over time. All this reduces the likelihood that the recipient countries will have the time and resources to turn to each other for assistance.

The lessons of history, however, are clear. The nations currently rich and developed benefited at an early stage from a more or less equitable exchange of information and ideas, as well as physical resources, with other nations. That exchange was possible because each nation was open to new information and ideas, eager to learn what others had done. Information and ideas were transferred without constraining the recipient's capacity to transform them to fit the local context. The assistance we give today has to seek to recreate those conditions of earlier years, when neighbors helped each other.

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